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Oscar Wilde: A Victorian Sage in a Modern Age

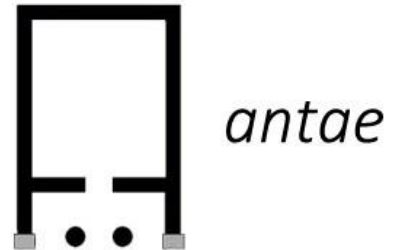
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Oscar Wilde: A Victorian Sage in a Modern Age

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Oscar Wilde has been widely viewed as a main figure in the English avant-garde movement. In his Bible of modernism, Peter Gay classifies Wilde as ‘a major figure in modernism as it was reaching toward its height’.¹ Sos Eltis, in addition, regards Wilde as the author of a ‘manifesto for modernism’, and goes as far as labelling Wilde, in her series of lectures on his work, as a ‘midwife to modernism’.² Furthermore, S. I. Salamensky defines Wilde, in her *The Modern Art of Influence*, as ‘the first modern man’ and ‘one of the central founders of the modern literary and dramatic traditions’.³ It seems that Wilde’s oeuvre and public persona have caused an intended misconstruing of his traditional themes and ideas. Drawing on Kant, Michel Foucault defines modernity ‘rather as an attitude than as a period of history’, which in his terms is a ‘way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that marks a relation of belonging and marks itself’ as an ‘ethos’.⁴ He goes on to define this ‘ethos’ as mainly ‘a break with tradition’.⁵ Based on Foucault’s definition of modernity as such an ethos, I will argue that Wilde was not the modernist author he is widely perceived to be, but a conventional Victorian sage who cleverly adopted, and tailored, the fashion of his age to deliver his thoroughly traditional teachings. The essay is split into five sections. The first deals with Wilde’s creation of his dandy self and the influences of Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold and Christ over him; the second section examines John Ruskin’s influence over Wilde’s theory of art, and Wilde’s self-perception; the third section continues to examine the influence of the Victorian sages on Wilde by exploring his criticism of modernity in some of his works; finally, the fourth and fifth sections deal with Wilde’s views on the roles of the sexes and his homosexuality respectively, and weigh these views, through further analysis of his works, against the argument of his modernity.

I: Dandy Priest in Plato’s Gymnasium

In an age of swift unprecedented change, where cities grew at astounding proportions, factories filled the air with smoke, and steam trains criss-crossed virgin nature, many

¹ Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 59.

² Sos Eltis, ‘Wilde, Victorian and Modernist’, 2013

<<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/2-wilde-victorian-and-modernist>> [accessed 29 December 2014]

³ S. I. Salamensky, *The Modern Art of Influence and the Spectacle of Oscar Wilde* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 2.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 39.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 39.

Victorians looked up to their post-Romantic prophets who offered the nostalgic security of a better past.⁶ The most prominent of these were Carlyle, Ruskin and Arnold, each of whom had his fair share of influence on the *fin de siècle* dandy.⁷

Carlyle was the first Victorian to recognise the new age of the man of letters. In *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Carlyle reproduced Johann Gottlieb Fichte's role of 'the literary man' as the new hero and guide to his people, a sage and a prophet to lead them in the darkness of industrialisation:

To the mass of men no such Divine Idea is recognisable in the world; they live merely, says Fichte, among the superficialities, practicalities and shows of the world, not dreaming that there is anything divine under them. But the Man of Letters is sent hither specially that he may discern for himself, and make manifest to us, this same Divine Idea [...].⁸

Carlyle was an acquaintance of Wilde's mother, who was a renowned Irish nationalist and a published poetess under the pseudonym Speranza. In addition, Wilde owned and cherished Carlyle's writing desk, which he lost along with all his belongings when he got bankrupt during his trials.⁹ Being fully acquainted with Carlyle's concept of the man of letters as a hero, Wilde invented himself as the hero of his age, an aesthetic celebrity sought after by the lowest and highest strata of society.¹⁰ He had cleverly recognised, however, that the Carlyle/Ruskin-type of sage had grown 'out of fashion, for Israel has taken to stoning her older prophets,' he writes to a friend; 'the social anarchist and the New Hedonist bid fair to take their place as teachers of mankind.'¹¹ To fight against his time, he resorted to adopting the fashion of his age: dandyism. He puts his philosophy in the words of Sir Robert Chiltern's advice that 'Every man of ambition has to fight his century with its own weapons'.¹²

The weapon of the age was aesthetic dandyism, and Wilde adopted it very well. He turned himself into the gentleman dandy who provoked the attention—in the form of admiration or denigration—of newspapers and the public. Reflecting on his career while in prison, Wilde summed up his defamiliarising approach in these brilliantly accurate words:

The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring: I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colours of things: there was

⁶ Regenia Gagnier, 'Wilde and the Victorians', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 18-33 (p. 31).

⁷ John Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 65.

⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Alan Shelston (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 237.

⁹ Anne Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (NY: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998), p. 31.

¹⁰ Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde*, p. 10.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, ed. by Peter Raby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 225.

nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder: I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet, at the same time I widened its range and enriched its characterisation: drama, novel, poem in rhyme, poem in prose, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty [...] I awoke the imagination of my country so that it created myth and legend around me [...].¹³

It is not surprising that his friend, Robert Ross, completely omitted this passage from the manuscript's first publication.¹⁴ Ross realised that the late Victorians would feel more offended at reading that they had been consciously manipulated and influenced by Wilde's genius in his quest for outdated beauty, as set against ugly late Victorian modernity. Furthermore, as Salamensky realises in her review of Petra Dierkes's *Salomé's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression*, Wilde self-consciously turned himself into a commodity celebrity in avant-garde form to sell his works to the public.¹⁵ She agrees with Dierkes's assertion of the modernity of Wilde's work: 'In celebrating, and offering himself to the public as a unique authority on modernity, Wilde sold his work and himself as quintessentially modern.' In addition, she raises doubts about whether 'Wilde, his oeuvre, and his legacy' should be put in one basket and 'treated as modernist'.¹⁶ Her doubts, however, fall short of being either affirmed or negated in her review. Nevertheless, it is clear here that there is a recognisable dichotomy between the modernity of Wilde's public personality and the dubious modernity of his oeuvre.

Like Carlyle and Ruskin, Arnold also influenced Wilde a great deal, especially with his coining of the terms "Hebraism" and "Hellenism". In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold embarked on the complex mission of defining an orderly cultural code for Victorian society based on combining Hebraism, or the Judeo-Christian tradition, with Hellenism, or Classical teachings. For Arnold, Hebraism is 'strictness of conscience', the 'boundless devotion to that inspiring and affecting pattern of self-conquest offered by Christ';¹⁷ Hellenism, on the other hand, is 'spontaneity of consciousness'.¹⁸ While the former necessitates a full dedication to something, the latter implies a complete freedom (of attachment, even) from everything, and whereas Arnold curtailed this Classical freedom in favour of Christian orderliness, Wilde managed to combine the two antonyms, not just in his personality but also in many of his writings. One aspect of this is the way Wilde frees Christ from the shackles of hypocritical society, as Anne Varty explains: 'Wilde makes the culture which Christ rebelled against rhyme with his own era.'¹⁹ In *The Soul of Man*, he embarked on defining a social and political utopia—similar to some extents to

¹³ Wilde, *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 95.

¹⁴ Wilde, *De Profundis*, ed. by Robert Ross (London: Methuen & Co., 1905), p. 22.

¹⁵ S. I. Salamensky, 'Salomé's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression (review)', *Modernism/Modernity*, 19:3 (2012), 621-23 (p. 622).

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 622-23.

¹⁷ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 88.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, p. 212.

William Morris's utopia in *News From Nowhere* (1890)—and distinguishes between three types of despots, the third and ultimate despot of whom is 'the People', who tyrannises 'over body and soul alike'.²⁰ Defending individualism, which he refers to here as socialism, Wilde refers to Christ's saying, 'Be thyself', and proclaims that 'he who would lead a Christ-like life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself [...] and realises the perfection of the soul that is within him'.²¹ 'The ideals that we owe to Christ,' Wilde adds, 'are the ideals of the man who abandons society entirely, or of the man who resists society absolutely'.²²

Wilde also combined Arnold's Hellenism and Hebraism in his poetry, which is dotted with Biblical and Classical references; Iain Ross describes the process as one in which 'Jesus is Hellenised', while Varty calls it the representation of 'Christ as a dandy'.²³ Whilst many of Wilde's poems are titled in Greek and Latin, Christ features predominantly in every corner, especially in Wilde's biblical *Poems in Prose*.²⁴ In *The Master*, for instance, Joseph of Arimathea is described as a Prometheus-like figure who lights a 'torch' and descends 'the hill into the valley' to meet a Christ-like figure, who has 'changed water into wine', 'healed the leper', and 'given sight to the blind'.²⁵ *The Teacher of Wisdom* also depicts a Christ-like figure who wanders the desert 'sun [...] without sandals', gets followed by 'disciples', and is filled with 'sorrow'.²⁶ There is no modernity to speak of here, but rather a typical Victorian fascination with and combination of Classical and Biblical mythology.

II: Eccentric Prophet

Ruskin's influence over Wilde had perhaps superseded that of others. Being one of Ruskin's close entourage of art pupils at Oxford, Wilde accompanied Ruskin in his eccentric scheme of building a 'flower bordered country road'.²⁷ In spite of hating physical labour, Wilde cherished the fact that the exercise brought him ever closer to the prophet of the age. He wrote very sincerely to his former teacher after graduating:

The dearest memories of my Oxford days are my walks and talks with you [...] [F]rom you I learned nothing but what is good. [...] There is in you something of prophet, of priest, and of poet, and to you the gods gave eloquence such as they have given to none other, so that your message might come to us with the fire of passion, and the marvel of music, making the deaf to hear and the blind to see.²⁸

²⁰ Wilde, *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), p.265.

²¹ Wilde, *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays*, p. 247.

²² *ibid.*, p.271.

²³ Iain Ross, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 191; Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, p. 188.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁵ Wilde, *Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 256.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.263

²⁷ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 48.

²⁸ Letter quoted in Kevin Jackson, *The Worlds of John Ruskin* (London: Pallas Athene: 2010), p. 113.

Not only is his admiration for Ruskin very clear here, but also some of the main attributes which influenced him in Ruskin's character: 'of poet', 'of prophet', 'of priest', and being Christ-like. Each of these was adopted by Wilde himself in his writings and in his best work of art, his personality, which will be examined in the subsequent sections of this essay. It is worth observing here, nevertheless, that besides Ruskin's personality, Wilde was also highly influenced by Ruskin's aesthetic art theories.

In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Ruskin defined architecture as art, and art as beautiful, powerful and imitative of nature, which he held as the greatest work of art of all, being the work of the master artist, God. Ruskin instructs artists and architects to look 'to Nature for instruction respecting form [...] look to her also to learn the management of color'.²⁹ Thus art becomes important through the divinity of nature, but nature, on the other hand, is not important in itself; it is only important as the great art of the greatest artist who has to be venerated by 'acknowledging the grace of God's permission' and imitating His art.³⁰ In this case, if nature is not regarded as art at all or as the direct creation of God, then it has no importance whatsoever. With the advances in natural sciences and the steady spread of Darwin's ideas in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), relying on nature to assert the importance of art became futile, something which Wilde was clever enough to notice. In a sagely fashion, Wilde reshaped Ruskin's theory of art in *The Decay of Lying* (1889), which he subtitles as a 'dialogue in praise of artifice over nature, and art over morality'.³¹ Here, he breathed life into art again by making it important in itself and raising it above the newly-discovered imperfections of nature and its lack of design. Art then becomes capable of revealing to us 'Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition'.³² In this sense, Wilde attempted (and some would say, succeeded) to save art from falling, along with nature, from its divine pedestal, and to protect it from the new grip of dry and ugly 'realism'.³³ Thus, Wilde's aesthetic of 'art for art's sake', which Gay mistakenly associates with that of modernism, is rather the continuation of the Victorian sage's mission to elevate art above mundane reality.³⁴

III: Slaying the New Dragon with Its Venomous Fang

As Ruskin, Carlyle, Arnold, Dickens and other post-romantics had rejected the materialism of their age, so Wilde rejected modernity. He held a Ruskin-influenced feudal view of the aristocracy as the natural leaders of their people, drawn from the gothic

²⁹ John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961), p. 118.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 151.

³¹ James Joyce, 'Oscar Wilde: The Poet of Salome', in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc., 1969), 56-60 (p. 57); Wilde, *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays*, p.viii.

³² *ibid.*, p.3.

³³ Walter Pater, 'A Novel by Mr. Oscar Wilde', in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc., 1969), 35-38 (p.35).

³⁴ Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*, pp. 66-69.

medieval traditions of feudal paternalism. In addition, apart from some dedications to his wife and friends, all of Wilde's published fiction before the trial is dedicated to members of the aristocracy. Many of these dedications have survived in current editions of his works. Ruskin adopted paternalism as an alternative to the philistine avarice of Victorian middle classes and the barbarian idleness of the aristocracy.³⁵ He was disappointed, however, with an aristocracy which seemed to have lost its purpose and claimed its titles without adhering to what he perceived as its duties. In *Sesame and Lilies*, he remarked:

[...] a Lord has legal claim only to his title in so far as he is the maintainer of the justice of the Lord of lords; and a Lady has legal claim to her title only so far as she communicates that help to the poor representatives of her Master, which women once, ministering to Him of their substance, were permitted to extend to that Master Himself; and when she is known, as He Himself once was, in breaking of bread.³⁶

Wilde was equally disappointed with the aristocracy which he viewed, in the scientific terms of his day, as having become hopelessly degenerate. England as a whole and the English aristocracy in particular are depicted in his plays as having lapsed into an unredeemable degeneracy. Wilde was familiar with the contemporary theories of naturalism and heredity; indeed, he refers to Cesare Lombroso to justify his sexuality in *De Profundis*, and Max Nordau in a letter to a friend.³⁷ The subject also features in 'Lord Arthur Saville's Crime' which is as much of a Greek myth prophecy as it is a naturalist lack of control over one's actions. The story is like the former because, like Oedipus, Lord Arthur Saville's crime is foretold from the beginning by the cheiromantist, 'Murder';³⁸ and the latter because, unlike Oedipus, Lord Arthur Saville is gullible to the cheiromantist's prophecy and seeks to fulfil it instead of defying it: he decides to postpone his marriage 'until he had committed the murder'.³⁹ Similarly, in many of Wilde's plays, the middle classes and the aristocracy are doomed beyond hope, as will be demonstrated below.

In *Lady Windermere's fan* (1892), Lady Windermere is sparked into suspecting, and consequently acting against, her husband by the words of the elderly Duchess of Berwick. As inexperienced and naïve as she is, she becomes convinced that 'all men are bad' and accepts the Duchess's account of the Duke's conduct as applicable to all men, including Lord Windermere.⁴⁰ The Duchess of Berwick's words resonate: 'Men become old, but they never become good'.⁴¹ After being consumed by suspicion, she risks her reputation in attempting revenge against her husband, only to discover through the duchess herself that she was mistaken and that it was all a rumour. Lord Windermere himself is described

³⁵ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (New York, NY: Silver, Burdett and Company, 1900), p. 43.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁷ Wilde, *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, p. 80; Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, p. 34.

³⁸ Wilde, *Complete Shorter Fiction*, p.9.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.9.

⁴⁰ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, p.49.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

as ‘modern’ by Dumby, when the rumours about him having an affair circulate.⁴² At another point, Cecil Graham tells Lord Augustus that they ‘would treat’ him ‘with more respect’ if he ‘wasn’t the most good-natured man in London’. He advises him afterwards: ‘don’t be led astray into the paths of virtue’.⁴³ Such ‘epigrams’ are designed specifically to directly attack the acclaimed modernity of the fin de siècle era and the degeneration of the aristocracy, far from the modernity that Eltis associates with the play, a point to which I will return in the fourth section of this paper.⁴⁴

In *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), Hester, the American writer, is depicted as the descendant of pure generations of puritan English immigrants. She declares her morality to Mrs Arbuthnot in uncompromising terms: ‘A Woman who has sinned should be punished.’⁴⁵ The conversations between Lady Hunstanton and Mrs Allonby, on the other hand, take a completely different course. It is worth noting first that Lady Hunstanton’s name implies redundancy as well as degeneracy. Her name is constituted of three syllables, ‘Hun/stan/ton’. The first syllable, ‘Hun’, is unique in comparison to the other two syllables and could be viewed as a symbol to the beginning of her lineage. The third syllable, /ton/, on the other hand is a distorted version of the second, /stan/. When compared, the shorter vowel and the missing consonant of the third syllable imply the deterioration of lineage which Nordau warned against in his *Degeneration* (1892). The degenerate Hunstanton recounts a scandal of a Lady Belton, who ‘eloped with Lord Fethersdale’: I remember the occurrence perfectly. Poor Lord Belton died three days afterwards of joy, or gout. I forget which. We had a large party staying here at the time, so we were all very much interested in the whole affair.⁴⁶ Further into the conversation, Mrs Allonby rejoices in the pleasure of having ‘far more things forbidden to us [women] than are forbidden to them’ (*Plays*, 137). Lord Illingworth is also on par with their level of immorality; he describes to his friend the state of British intellect, on behalf of Wilde, as something on which ‘the illiterates play the drum’.⁴⁷ When Lady Hunstanton overhears the word ‘drum’ and wonders what he is talking about, he blatantly lies: ‘I was merely talking to Mrs Allonby about the leading articles in the London newspapers’.⁴⁸ As humorous and satirical as the performance of such lines may be, the shock is intensified through the accents used and aristocratic costumes worn by the cast. The stereotypically and traditionally morally superior aristocracy is devoid of any kind of sense or sensibility. In fact, the only incorrupt character in the play is Hester, the racially pure ‘puritan’ whose genes have been preserved in the youthful lands of the new world.⁴⁹ She is reminiscent of Virginia, in ‘The Canterville Ghost’, to whom the aristocratic ghost hands over his

⁴² *ibid.*, p.65.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p.77.

⁴⁴ George Woodcock, ‘The Social Rebel’, in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc., 1969), 150-168 (p. 155); Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 133.

⁴⁵ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, p.173.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.140.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.144.

heritage 'jewels' as a sign of his giving her the right to take over his aristocratic and paternalistic role in the world.⁵⁰ In the play, Mrs Arbuthnot and her illegitimate son are also redeemed by their repentance and through Hester's Christian acceptance of them. At the end of the play, they all depart for a new world and a renewed chance of a better life. Lord Illingworth's future, like the Canterville ghost's, is summed up as being that of 'a man of no importance'.⁵¹

An Ideal Husband (1895) is a play about the search for the ideal in a imperfect world. The mirage of the ideal haunts the play: the 'Ideal Husband', the 'Ideal Butler' and the ideal politician.⁵² The motif of the ideal could be viewed as one of Plato's influences over Wilde. Here the illusion of the shadows in the cave is depicted as the illusory 'ideal' of degenerate modernity. The name of the play, through its use of the indefinite article, suggests the multiplicity of the ideal, which contributes to its illusive nature within the play. The play, in this respect, highlights the superficiality of modern culture which seeks the ideal in name rather than demeanour, in fashion rather than attitude, in mere shadows rather than the actual world. Referring to himself, Lord Goring says, 'I usually say what I really think. A great mistake nowadays'.⁵³ According to Goring, in these times of modernity, it is better for one to be hypocritical than sincere. In the third act of the play, he declares that 'it is the growth of moral sense in women, that makes marriage such a hopeless, one-sided institution'.⁵⁴ Lady Chiltern, on the other hand, describes the important topics of 'Factory Acts, Female Inspectors, the Eight Hours' Bill' and 'the Parliamentary Franchise' as 'thoroughly uninteresting'.⁵⁵ Like Lady Hunstanton and Lord Illingworth, the modern aristocrats here are mocked for being devoid of any sense of responsibility or morality: the complete opposite of what they were traditionally expected to be and what Wilde and Ruskin wished them to remain.

Like the search for the ideal in *An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) is about the search for Earnest. Earnest is the mirage here, the ideal husband which is sought by every girl. The play is highly farcical; Jack could become Earnest and Earnest could become Jack, then it turns out that Jack is also Earnest, which is news to Jack himself as well as his bride and the audience. The farcical plot is reminiscent of W. S. Gilbert's *Engaged*, though taken to a completely new nonsensical level which baffled Wilde's critics and reviewers. William Archer, a drama critic and a contemporary admirer of Wilde's, could not find any substance to the play apart from its humour: 'What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own canons and conventions, and is nothing but an absolutely wilful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality?'.⁵⁶ St. John Hankin, on the other hand, regarded it as a 'joke' production of a lousy artist: 'he might have been a great dramatist if he had been

⁵⁰ Wilde, *Complete Shorter Fiction*, p.83.

⁵¹ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, p.191.

⁵² *ibid.*, p.192, 246.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.228.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p.248.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p.231.

⁵⁶ Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, p. 205.

willing to take his art seriously.⁵⁷ What Archer, Hankin, and others could not realise was the fact that Wilde designed his play for that very purpose. *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* is its subtitle. The genius of the play is in mocking its serious modern audience and making them laugh at themselves without them even knowing it. He mocked their hypocritical seriousness by making them enjoy what they pretended to despise, ‘a play which raises no principles’.⁵⁸ Brilliantly, Wilde made his audience, rather than the characters of the play, mock their own modernity. Here the poet transcended his usual puppets by turning the audience into the main characters of his bigger play, the real people who laugh at their mere shadows inside Plato’s cave. Farce as a genre here is also developed to a level which prefigures Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Whereas Beckett mocks previous generations for their centuries-long wait for a supernatural being and embraces an agnostic modern attitude, Wilde mocks the hypocritical void of modernity and nostalgically longs for an honest Biblical past.⁵⁹

IV: Reluctant Feminist

Wilde was more pro-women’s rights than Ruskin or Carlyle, and he even edited *The Woman’s World*, which aimed at cultivating women’s minds and offered educated women a chance to write on contemporary women’s affairs.⁶⁰ Wilde’s feminism is defined, however, by John Stuart Mill’s boundaries. Mill acknowledges that ‘the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself’.⁶¹ In *The Subjection of Women*, he traces back the origins of the ‘master and slave’ relationship between men and women in Victorian times to its Classical roots: ‘there are different natures among mankind, free natures, and slave natures; that ‘the Greeks were of a free nature’ and ‘the barbarian races of Thracians and Asiatics of a slave nature’.⁶² Mill goes on to explain in *On Liberty* that ‘those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury,’ and in this case, ‘Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians [women], provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end.’⁶³ Following Mill’s logic, men’s continued rule over women would be sanctionable so long as the end of this treatment was that of ‘cultivat[ing]’ their ‘minds’; this would eventually lead to the much aspired ‘equality of the sexes’ and the ‘cultivated sympathy’ between husband and wife.⁶⁴ Mill failed to explain as to when this process of cultivating women’s minds would attain its end, but it is clear that Wilde, through his editorship of *The Woman’s World*, aimed to continue the endless process.⁶⁵

⁵⁷ St. John Hankin, ‘Wilde as a Dramatist’, in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc., 1969), 61-72 (p. 71).

⁵⁸ Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, p. 205.

⁵⁹ Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*, p. 452.

⁶⁰ Oscar Wilde, *Selected Journalism*, ed. by Anya Clayworth (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2004), p. xx.

⁶¹ John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), p.1.

⁶² *ibid.*, p.16.

⁶³ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co. Ltd, 1859), p. 7.

⁶⁴ Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, p.66.

⁶⁵ Wilde, *Selected Journalism*, p. 81-140.

Like Mill, who was introduced to feminism by his friend and wife Harriet Taylor Mill and her daughter Helen Taylor, Wilde's reluctant feminism was influenced by two female figures in his life: his mother, Lady Wilde, and his sister, Isola, who died in her childhood.⁶⁶ Lady Wilde was a nationalist Irish poetess and folklorist who published her verse under the pseudonym Speranza. Her poetry and collections of Irish fairy tales greatly influenced him. It was her self-sacrificing personality, however, which influenced him most and exerted on him a 'mother fixation'.⁶⁷ Wilde's father, Sir Wilde, was 'rumoured to have done his share in raising the Irish birthrate', which resulted in several illegitimate children.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Lady Wilde 'was conversant with her husband's [scandals]', personifying the "Angel of the House" Victorian stereotype, mainly for the sake of her children.⁶⁹ As Melissa Knox asserts, 'when Oscar was a university student, he spoke with great admiration of his mother's tolerance in allowing one of his father's lovers to sit by his deathbed.'⁷⁰ His sister, Isola, on the other hand, came to represent for him the ideal of the puritan virgin who transcends the corruption of knowledge and society. Dying in childhood, she also impressed on him the idea of the purity of a soul which could not cope with the materialism of the body. Katherine Byrne explores the Victorian perception of fatal childhood maladies in 'Consuming the Family Economy' and analyses the particular influence of consumption on Dickens's fiction.⁷¹ Her argument could be applied to Oscar Wilde's memory of his sister, Isola. Her mortal illness rendered her 'ethereal, even divine' to him, a puritan virgin who consistently features in his works, as will be explored below.⁷²

Wilde never promoted full freedom for women as it is understood in the contemporary sense, but only in terms of their mental cultivation. However, he respected and cherished the typical Victorian female stereotypes: the motherly mother or the 'Angel in the House', personified by Lady Wilde, and the puritan virgin, personified by Isola, his sister. Needless to say both are derived from the traditional conception of Mary, the virgin mother of Christ. His female characters often fit into one stereotype or the other of this Victorian dichotomy, which goes completely against John Sloan's claims that Wilde had a large role in the modernist 'questioning of Victorian attitudes to the sexes'.⁷³ Lady Windermere, for instance, nearly ruins her reputation and her husband's by listening to the gossip of the degenerate Duchess of Berwick and Lord Darlington's honey-dipped venom: 'If I know you at all, I know that you can't live with a man who treats you like

⁶⁶ Melissa Knox, *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide* (New York, NY: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 9.

⁶⁷ G. Wilson Knight, 'Christ and Wilde', in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc., 1969), 138-149 (p. 138).

⁶⁸ Knox, *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 13; Knox, *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide*, p. 6.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷¹ Katherine Byrne, 'Consuming the Family Economy: Tuberculosis and Capitalism in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 29:1 (2007), 1-16.

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷³ Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde*, p. 106.

this! What sort of life would you have with him?’⁷⁴ She appears as though she is going to leave her husband and her child, in search of her own self, exactly like Henrik Ibsen’s Nora does in *A Doll’s House*, which was first performed thirteen years before Wilde’s. After recalling Ibsen’s modernist play in his audience’s imagination, Wilde intentionally redeems Lady Windermere towards the end of the play by making her choose motherhood above all else. Ironically, she listens to Mrs Erlynne’s moving words: ‘Go back to that child who even now, in pain or in joy, may be calling to you. [...] God gave you that child. He will require from you that you make his life fine, that you watch over him. What answer will you make to God if his life is ruined through you?’⁷⁵ Wilde makes it clear here that a woman’s motherhood is a divine gift for which the woman should devote and sacrifice herself, exactly like his mother did. Mrs Erlynne, on the other hand, is the unmotherly mother, who knows exactly how precious motherhood is, but chooses to live ‘for twenty years’ away from her ‘girl’.⁷⁶ She is shunned out of the play by Wilde towards the end, losing any right to ever see her daughter again, and condemned to a life with her degenerate aristocratic puppet husband, Lord Augustus. She lamentably declares herself on the side of degenerate modernity to the righteous Lord Windermere: ‘I lost one illusion last night. I thought I had no heart. I find I have, and a heart doesn’t suit me, Windermere. Somehow it doesn’t go with modern dress.’⁷⁷ After being ‘disgraced before everyone’, Mrs Erlynne has no choice but to fulfil Lord Windermere’s commanding wishes: ‘I have the right to tell you never to enter this house again, never to attempt to come near my wife’.⁷⁸ Of course, the puppet husband affords her riches that save her from having to blackmail and manipulate other people in the future, but this only serves to give her the luxury of time which allows her to reflect on her true feelings. Wilde makes it clear in his stage instructions that when Mrs Erlynne says, ‘I want to live childless’, she is not saying the truth in her heart but saying it while ‘hiding her feelings with a trivial laugh’.⁷⁹

In her modernist perception of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Eltis believes that ‘Mrs Erlynne’s rejection of the maternal role provides yet another example of Wilde subverting the traditional theatrical climax’.⁸⁰ Eltis’s view, however, is subverted by her strenuous comparison of the play to several French plays which deploy similar themes, including Sardou’s *Odette* (1881). This leads Eltis to find in Wilde’s avoidance of condemning Mrs Erlynne to ‘a painful death, poverty, or the rigours of hospital nursing’ an assertion of her ‘fallen woman’ character.⁸¹ In fact, it would have been utterly sentimental and strictly boring for his modern audience if Wilde had ended the role in any of the modes Eltis suggests for a traditional ending. On the other hand, not following the redundant sentimental approach does not mean that the character is being asserted either. Anne

⁷⁴ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, p.62.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.74.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p.52.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.88.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p.86.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p.88.

⁸⁰ Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 74.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 78.

Varty explains that Wilde punishes Mrs Erlynne by maintaining her 'status as an outsider to the last'.⁸² Drawing on Wilde's stage directions of the play in his letters, Varty asserts: 'Wilde was determined to avoid any sense that Mrs Erlynne might be assimilated with the Society she chooses to leave.'⁸³ Wilde gets Mrs Erlynne at the end to occupy the same spot which the Duchess of Berwick, a 'caricature creature of fashion', 'occupied at the beginning'.⁸⁴ Thus, Mrs Erlynne's punishment is that of remaining an outcast without a chance of being assimilated in the society she tries to get reintroduced to at the beginning of the play. If Wilde was simply aiming to present 'the conventional view of the fallen woman' and ironically subverting it as Eltis remarks, he could have done so very easily with Lady Windermere herself, the central character of the play, instead of trying to do so with a secondary character.⁸⁵ The author who bravely criticised and mocked the degeneracy of his audience was also brave enough to subvert conventional views of fallen women in a more direct way if he wanted to do so. Being the Victorian sage he was, however, this was never his intention.

Mrs Arbuthnot, the antipode of Mrs Erlynne in *A Woman of No Importance*, is also a fallen woman who succumbed to sin and the temptations of Lord Illingworth in her youth. Unlike Mrs Erlynne, who is condemned to a semi-Classical perpetual punishment by being sent away from her daughter, Mrs Arbuthnot is rewarded for her choice of 'twenty years' of motherhood by 'American [...] puritan' redemption and acceptance.⁸⁶ Another character who bears a resemblance to Lady Wilde's motherly self-sacrifice is the Star-Child's mother in *A House of Pomegranates*. To teach her son humility, she undergoes a transformation, from a bright 'queen' to a 'foul beggar-woman'.⁸⁷ She also triggers and witnesses her son's punishment for his own sake, and watches him turn from being 'white and delicate as sawn ivory' to something that looks like a toad with a 'scaled' body 'like an adder'.⁸⁸ She perseveringly sees him suffer as an outcast leading the life of a nomadic Christ until he finally learns humility, at which point she transforms him back, brings him 'into the palace', dresses him in 'fine raiment', and makes him 'King'.⁸⁹

The Isola-like virgins similarly appear in many of Wilde's works: Hester in *A Woman of No Importance*, Virginia in *The Canterville Ghost* and Arthur Saville's fiancé in the story of his crime. Another one of the Isola doubles is Sybil Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. She is 'so shy', 'there is something of a child about her', waiting for 'Prince Charming'.⁹⁰ Dorian falls in love with her superb Shakespearean acting skills, her art.

⁸² Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, p. 166.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, p. 133.

⁸⁶ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, p.144.

⁸⁷ Wilde, *Complete Shorter Fiction*, p.242.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, pp.240, 244.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p.251.

⁹⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 33; *ibid.*, p.44.

When she falls in love with him and loses her virginal artistic abilities because of him, however, he soon realises that he does not love her anymore. Like Ophelia after Hamlet loses his interest in her, or ‘The Lady of Shalotte’ locked in the tower, she commits suicide and deems herself a martyr of the love she could not attain. Shakespeare’s influence on Wilde and the resemblance of the novel to *Hamlet* is a point to which I shall return briefly in the following section of the paper. It is sufficient at this stage, however, to illustrate that both Sybil and Ophelia commit suicide similarly. Ophelia is even mentioned in the novel when Sybil dies: ‘mourn for Ophelia if you like’.⁹¹

As much as he is in favour of motherly mothers and puritanical virgins, Wilde is by far less contented with women who do not comply with his strictly Victorian ideals. The late Victorian age witnessed the rise of educated, independent women who lived on their own, made their own living and refused to remain ‘inferior’ to men as Victorian social codes expected them to.⁹² They were dubbed “new women” and stereotyped in fiction and media as ugly, unfeminine, and ironically promiscuous with an uncontrollable lust for sexual knowledge. Sydney Grundey’s play, *The New Woman* (1894), is a very good example of this kind of stereotyping. A similar image can be found in Wilde’s biblically-disguised *Salomé*. Wilde’s fear of the new women, however, seems to be limited to their sexual knowledge and promiscuity since he was a promoter of women’s education. His new-woman characters are depicted as attractive in the style of French ‘femme fatales’, and their tragic heroines’ fall is only due to their sexual knowledge, and nothing else besides.⁹³ Mrs Erlynne, for instance, is depicted as an attractive fallen woman who has the ability to manipulate men as she so wishes, and, as we have already seen, she gets punished because of this. *Salomé*, however, is a better example.

In the beginning of the play, *Salomé* is a ‘beautiful’ princess who does not understand why Herod’s gazes at her ‘with his mole’s eyes’.⁹⁴ She wonders, ‘I know not what it means. In truth, yes, I know it’.⁹⁵ She knows vaguely that there is something indecent about his gazes but does not fully comprehend the details of what they may lead to. She only fully understands one thing: ‘it is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that’.⁹⁶ Then she gets attracted to the voice of Iokanaan and she asks the young Syrian to ‘bring forth that prophet’.⁹⁷ Iokanaan eventually is allowed to get ‘out of his cistern’ and she falls in love with his ‘eyes’, which she describes as ‘black lakes troubled by fantastic moons’.⁹⁸ She approaches him and becomes even more ‘amorous’ and asks to touch his ‘body’.⁹⁹ She is clearly by this stage sexually aroused; she has discovered a

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p.133.

⁹² W. D. Rubinstein, *Britain’s Century: A Political and Social History 1815-1905*. (London: Arnold, 1998), p. 318.

⁹³ Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, p. 136.

⁹⁴ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, p.102.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p.103.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p.104.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p.106.

sexual knowledge of her body and she is in dire need to satisfy her virginal desires. Wilde, in Iokanaan's words, responds like any self-righteous Victorian man would when lusted over by a dangerous new woman, and asks her to stay away from him; 'by woman came evil into the world'.¹⁰⁰ The danger of Salomé's transformation is demonstrated not just in her acceptance to dance 'the dance of the seven veils' to Herod, but more elaborately in the bizarre reward she demands for performing the dance: 'the head of Iokanaan'.¹⁰¹ When delivered to her, she kisses his 'mouth', predicts her own fall, and blames the dead prophet for it; 'I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste and thou didst fill my veins with fire.'¹⁰² The outraged Herod, who acts as the hypocritical aristocratic male with double standards, orders his guards to 'kill' Salomé, the new 'woman'.¹⁰³ Death here may seem as one of the sentimental modes of finishing the role which Eltis mentions, as discussed above, but the level of violence displayed on stage in executing Salomé is far from being sentimentally boring, for the vengeful 'soldiers, rush forward and crush beneath their shields, Salomé'.¹⁰⁴ Thus, *Salomé*, like *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is not a modernist emblem 'representing the overturning of the old' as Varty suggests, but a depiction of the dangerous new being destroyed by the old.¹⁰⁵

V: Discreet Homosexual with Troubled Doubles

Oscar Wilde's public performance as a dandy led to a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde duplicity between the real Wilde and the dandy Wilde known publicly. Wilde commented on the duplicity he created for himself: 'Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks of me.'¹⁰⁶ Like Stevenson's Mr Hyde, the real Wilde had a lethal side to him which Wilde describes in the words of Lord Darlington: 'I can resist everything except temptation.'¹⁰⁷ Unfortunately for him, Wilde's temptation was homosexuality, something which could not be tolerated by the hypocritical modernity he made it his job to criticise. Ellmann explains that it was Robert Ross, in 1888, who first seduced him.¹⁰⁸ After that, Wilde went on a series of casual homosexual affairs, until his seriously fatal love relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas made him descend into the world of male prostitutes.¹⁰⁹

Wilde struggled at first to come to terms with this dimension of his personality. He was troubled by his feelings long before they materialised into physical love.¹¹⁰ He writes in

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, pp. 119, 120.

¹⁰² Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, p.125.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, p. 137.

¹⁰⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by R Hart-Davis (London: R Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 352.

¹⁰⁷ Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, p.45.

¹⁰⁸ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 259-60.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 366.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 295.

‘Panthea’ (1881): ‘But we oppress our natures, God or Fate | Is our enemy, we starve and feed.’¹¹¹ He soon however managed to establish an erudite synchronisation between his traditional ideas and his homosexual feelings. ‘His solution,’ Iain Ross remarks, ‘was to adopt, in public discourse, an uncharacteristic dualism: there was sodomy, with which he had nothing to do; and there was an entirely intellectual love between men, with which the law had nothing to do.’¹¹² His attempt at becoming a Classics professor at Oxford did not go to waste, and upon burrowing through his old books he found an uncanny similarity between his love for younger men and the ancient Greek tradition of older-younger male love.¹¹³

Afterwards, he also embarked on a profound study of Shakespeare’s sonnets through which he discovered Shakespeare’s homosexual love for a contemporary male actor. ‘Rather than presenting this theory in the form of a literary-critical essay, however, Wilde embeds this interpretation within a narrative frame.’¹¹⁴ Joseph Bristow gives a very valid reason for this in his study of Wilde’s identities. ‘The Criminal Law Act of 1885’, included a clause ‘to eradicate sexual acts between men [...] The literal assertion of the same-sex desire in “The Portrait of Mr W. H.” would have immediately incriminated Wilde.’¹¹⁵ Given that Wilde was clearly keen on avoiding any conflict with legal authorities, he had no mind to champion homosexual rights.

Oscar Wilde’s homosexuality has often been exaggerated by his critics so as to go along with his widely-perceived modernist persona. Ellmann treats him as a self-asserting homosexual author whose ‘homosexuality fired his mind’.¹¹⁶ Knox proclaims him as a champion of gay rights.¹¹⁷ In fact, Wilde was very discreet about his homosexual activities and only a select group of his friends knew of them, until things got out of his control in the months leading up to the trials.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, he refused to tell his lawyer about his sexual nature, and even during the trial he defended Lord Alfred Douglas’s labelling of their relationship in *Two Loves* (1894), ‘the love that dare not speak its name’, as a purely Platonic intellectual love:¹¹⁹

The Love that dare not speak its name in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as

¹¹¹ Oscar Wilde, *Complete Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 94.

¹¹² Ross, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*, p. 162.

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Dustin Friedman, ‘Negative Eroticism: Lyric Performativity and the Sexual Subject in Oscar Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”’, *ELH*, 80:2 (2013), 598-626 (p. 599).

¹¹⁵ Joseph Bristow, ‘A Complex Multiform Creature: Wilde’s Sexual Identities’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 195-218 (p. 208).

¹¹⁶ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 265.

¹¹⁷ Knox, *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide*, p. 99.

¹¹⁸ Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, p. 33.

¹¹⁹ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 413.

it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the 'Love that dare not speak its name', and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him.¹²⁰

If he was really keen to defend homosexual rights in the modern sense, or looking for an opportunity to assert his homosexuality, this would have been his perfect opportunity for doing so.

The duality in Wilde's personality was reflected in the doubles he created of himself in many of his characters. For instance, 'Wilde saw the three [main] characters' of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 'as refractions of his own image.'¹²¹ Certainly many of his fictional characters reflect his inner troubles with what he perceived as evil temptations. In *The Fisherman and His Soul*, for example, the fisherman struggles with the temptations of Lucifer first, then with the temptations of his own evil soul, which urges him every time they meet to leave his beautiful wife. *The Star-Child* is also another example of beauty which cannot resist the evil of vanity and has to be transformed into the epitome of ugliness in order to get pitied and accepted by his city and his family. In addition, the evil of this narcissistic vanity is clearly demonstrated in *The Birthday of the Infanta*, with the Dwarf's fatal temptation to look at himself in the mirror. As many as there are, none of his writings, however, are as ironically foretelling of Wilde's tragic demise or reflect the dangerous combination of traditional Victorian ideas and homosexuality, as much as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does. Dorian Gray, who is a combination of Hamlet's looks and Macbeth's foolish vanity, slips into the underworld of crime by believing in his own vain invincibility. Wilde may well have projected himself onto the character of Dorian Gray, consciously or unconsciously. For like Dorian, Wilde is a Macbeth-like figure whose vain belief in himself finally led him to his own doom, a tragic hero whose greatness is doomed. His ambition drove him to seek 'success' through 'fame or even notoriety'.¹²² From a Classical perspective, Wilde could also be perceived as a Socrates-like martyr, sacrificed by the philistines he criticised and aimed to guide.¹²³

Wilde's only novel depicts a homoerotic relationship between a beautiful youth and his creator-artist Basil Hallward, which gets corrupted by the Lucifer-like tempter, Lord Henry Wotton. This is similar to Shakespeare's love toward the beautiful Willie Hews, in *The Portrait of Mr W. H.*, which gets corrupted by 'Marlowe'.¹²⁴ There are many indicators in the text of the novel's homoerotic nature. Basil expresses his love towards

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 463.

¹²¹ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 301.

¹²² Sloan, *Authors in Context: Oscar Wilde*, p. 9.

¹²³ Ross, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*, p. 163.

¹²⁴ Wilde, *Complete Shorter Fiction*, p.131.

Dorian in these besotted words: 'I worshipped you. I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you'.¹²⁵ There are also indicators of the criminality associated with this type of love. Basil, for instance, describes the day on which he decides to paint Dorian as 'a fatal day'.¹²⁶ Dorian himself senses a criminality of the devilish love in Basil's artistic expression and tells him, 'I must never sit to you again', 'there is something fatal' about the 'portrait'.¹²⁷ After Dorian is fully corrupted by Henry's poisonous words on youth, Basil asks him jealously, 'Why is your friendship so fatal to young men?'¹²⁸ He feels betrayed by the beauty he has idealised in his best art and demands an answer about Dorian's 'great friend' and the young man he is 'inseparable' from.¹²⁹ Dorian's name itself is far from free of homosexual connotations. According to Iain Ross, 'the Dorians', who are 'northern invaders of early Greek settlements', and who 'introduced the institution of *paiderastia* into Greece, led to "Dorian" becoming a code word for Greek love in Uranian circles'.¹³⁰

Even in his fiction, Wilde reproduces old materials to convey his traditional message. The motif of a mysterious pact with the devil in return for eternal youth is far from original. Both Wilhelm Goethe and Christopher Marlow reproduced the German myth of *Faust*, and the love relationship which gets corrupted by a devil is a *Genesis* one which Milton perfected in *Paradise Lost*. Even Gothic portraiture itself had been ploughed to exhaustion previously. In 'Magic Picture Mania', Powell ingeniously explores Wilde's transcendence of his seemingly endless sources, which range from Russian and French to Irish and Oriental.¹³¹

In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde would turn from the formula of a remarkable yet unmiraculous picture to embrace a portrait with distinctly supernatural power. Art, Wilde had come to believe, was at its best in denying naturalistic fact to ally itself with the unreal: 'Lying,' he says, 'the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.'¹³²

This links Wilde to the chain of Victorian sages who preceded him, and makes it clear that Wilde's point in *Dorian Gray* was to continue Ruskin's mission of saving art—albeit this time from the realism of Thomas Hardy and George Gissing—by giving it its full independence and the capital 'A'. *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* reflects the early stages of Wilde's development of art as 'lying', and *Dorian Gray* his mastery of it. Both, in addition, are an attack on the ugly realist modernity and a revival of the old Gothic past.

Conclusion

¹²⁵ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p.11.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p.94.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, p.96.

¹²⁸ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p.123.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ Ross, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*, p. 170.

¹³¹ Kerry Powell, 'Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray: Magic-Picture Mania in Late Victorian Fiction', *Philological Quarterly*, 62:2 (1983), 147-170.

¹³² *ibid.*, p. 153.

In *De Profundis*, Wilde elevates himself above Byron; ‘Byron was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of the age and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of wider scope.’¹³³ Oscar Wilde associated himself with the immortal Classical Greeks, with the genius of Shakespeare, with the divinity of Christ, and with the nobility of the Victorian prophets. He fought what he perceived as ugly hypocritical modernity with modern weapons: aesthetic dandyism and self-dramatisation. Remarkably, however, his ‘permanent’ dramatic techniques have outlived his demise and continue to fool us today with his false modern persona, just as Dorian’s portrait concealed his soul.

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¹³³ Wilde, *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, p. 95.

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